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ABSTRACT

The classroom environment that teachers provide for special needs students directly influences students' self-concept. To explore the scope of this relationship, students in homogeneous and heterogeneous classes, along with other environmental factors, were studied. Data was taken from special needs students in middle school, who either had been separated into a homogeneous class or had been mainstreamed. Direct observations of teachers and different classes were conducted and these observations were combined with student interviews and sociograms. Results were analyzed using measures of central tendency, measures of dispersion, selected t-tests, and other techniques. Findings indicate that no significant difference exists between self concept and class grouping. However, a strong relationship between grouping and teacher attitude was discovered. Those students with a team of consistently supportive teachers had higher self-concept scores than did students with less supportive teachers. Parental support, it was determined, showed no significant difference in relationship to self-concept. This suggests that students had loyalties to their parents regardless of parental support. Overall, students' self-concepts, irrespective of their grouping, are elevated in consistently supportive school environments, or are lessened in inconsistent or unsupportive classroom environments. Contains 14 references. (RJM)

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Running Head: SELF-CONCEPT IN SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

SELF-CONCEPT IN SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS IN HOMOGENEOUS AND HETEROGENEOUS GROUPINGS IN SEVENTH AND EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping with self-concept. A related purpose was to determine if other environmental factors had an effect on self-concept. The "Self-Appraisal Scale" developed for The City University of New York was administered as a pre-test and post-test. Direct observations of teachers, homogeneous groups, and heterogeneous groups were conducted, as well as student interviews and sociograms. Data was analyzed using measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion, t-tests for dependent (correlated) means, t-tests for independent means, and Pearson Product Moment Correlations. Results indicated that there was no significant difference between self-concept and grouping. There was a very strong relationship between grouping and teacher attitude. There was also a relationship between pre-test and post-test scores. This show that the attitude that teachers take towards students has a direct relationship on self-concept and that the time spent in a supportive classroom environment effects self-concept.

A student's perception of himself routes progress not only in realms of academic achievement, but in life in general. There has been a great deal of research on what self concept is, how it is developed, and how it can be improved.

Self perception is related to how an individual feels about himself and how he is viewed by significant others. Acceptance from parents, family members, friends, and teachers also influences self-concept. The environment, in short, determines self-perception. Environments of acceptance and success raise self-concept. In contrast, environments of failure can cause frustration and make the individual feel unsuccessful and harassed. This in turn can cause substantial blows to an individual's self-concept (Heyman, 1990).

The topic of self-concept and special needs students raises some questions. Would an environment that consists of similar students with a teacher educated to specifically support individual learning disabilities improve self-concept in special needs students? The current trend is to mainstream special needs students into heterogeneous classes and improve self-concept by being around "normal" students, and in "regular" classrooms (Burswick, 1989), but is this environment more accepting and does it promote improved self-concept? These questions were explored in this paper.

Literature Review

Findings regarding self-concept have been contradictory in many ways, usually in special needs groups. Studies report lower self-concept among special needs children, while others report no difference in children with special needs and normally achieving students. Inclusion is

controversial; researchers disagree on whether inclusion is connected with lower self-concept, improved self-concept, or has no effect on self-concept in special needs students (Priel and Leshem, 1990).

Research on self-concept has primarily been performed on special needs students in middle school years because the assessment of self-perception in young children constitutes some specific problems. According to research accumulated, children younger than eight or nine tend to overrate their competence. Teacher evaluations also point to the development of a positive bias of young children's self-appraisals (Priel and Leshem, 1990).

The research in this paper specifically examines special needs students who have been labeled mildly mentally retarded. Special needs students make up the majority of retarded persons in America. Special needs students learn in the same ways that non-special needs students do. However, special needs students' rate of learning is slow and their rate of development resembles that of younger children. In addition, special needs students perform poorly on tasks compared to age peers. Yet, these differences are usually hidden until the special needs student enters school. Later in life, special needs adults often lose their identity when they move into the work place. (Lewis and Doorlag, 1991).

Students who have special needs report lower levels of self-efficiency than non-special needs peers. Teachers also report lower self-concept on items that focus on specific skill deficiencies. Students that have special needs do not have strong positive feelings about their own abilities and futures. A correlation exists between negative self-concept and failure in the life of the special

needs student. (Patton and Polloway, 1990).

Self-concept influences achievement outcome through its effect on motivation. People who hold positive self-perceptions usually try harder and persist longer in difficult situations. Students who feel ineffectual tend to reduce effort and give up more easily. Thus, the effects of self-concept are central as either causes or factors that compound learning difficulties (Chapman, 1988).

A study by Butler and Marinov-Glassman (1994) compared sixty-eight learning disabled children, including special needs students, in homogeneous classes within special schools to sixty-eight learning disabled children, including special needs students, in inclusive classes within regular schools. Butler and Marinov-Glassman's study monitored these students from third to seventh grade and reported that early elementary school exposure to more competent peers undermines perceived competence, and that this trend continued through the seventh grade. Thus, it is questionable that exposure to non-disabled peers enables special needs students to boast a positive self-concept. Instead, it was found that as soon as children developed the capacity for social comparison children with special needs begin to compare themselves with primarily non-special needs peers damaging the special needs students' self-concepts (Butler and Marinov-Glassman, 1994).

Self-concept continues to regress as the student ages and failures accumulate. By the time special needs students reach adolescence their self-concept is even lower. Special needs students are well aware of learning disabilities and have long histories of failure. Poor self-concept in special needs students is not only related to academic areas. Problems also exist in establishing meaningful relationships, together with school learning difficulties to form broadly based poor peer

comparisons. In light of these negative experiences, it might be expected that special needs adolescents develop increasingly negative overall self-concepts as they age (Chapman, 1988).

Another study linked special needs students and poor self-concept into three categories: (a) school related factors; (b) characteristics related to being labeled as different and being singled out; © factors inherent in the learning disabilities syndrome. Tests that were done on special needs students in a heterogeneous setting portrayed them as passive, having perceived helplessness, dependency, a lack of social and academic confidence, and a sense of low self-worth. Special needs subjects reported more feelings of insecurity, depression, tension, and difficulty with impulse control. Special needs students described themselves as feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities and difficulties and as having difficulty coping with their lives (Raviv and Stone, 1991).

Despite conflicting research the current trend is to mainstream the special needs student into regular classrooms. The belief of the school system is that inclusion offers greater gain in social behaviors; that students engage in less inappropriate behaviors; and accomplish more of their objectives than those not placed in exclusive settings (Heckmon and Rike, 1994).

Members of the Regular Education Initiative (REI) point out problems in both homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings of learning disabled students and special needs students. The REI points out the social stigma that occurs in homogeneous environments that are segregated from the mainstream, but also, the lack of progress in self-concept and academic achievement in special needs students in pull-out programs. However, REI concludes that special education programs and services provided in homogeneous classrooms would achieve better educational outcomes for

students with special needs (Zigmond, Jenkins, Fuchs, Deno, Fuchs, Baker, Jenkins, Couthino, 1995).

REI advocates imply that the likelihood of children with special needs developing poor self-perceptions is lessened when they are placed in an inclusive setting without a "special" label while still receiving support services. REI proponents report poorer self-concepts in identified (but not placed) special needs children with ties who were in regular classrooms. However, on four out of seven self-concept tests, special needs children in self-contained classrooms scored higher than academically handicapped (but non-identified) children in inclusive classes (Bear, Clever and Proctor, 1991).

Inclusion advocates ignore the statements of the Learning Disabilities Association and the Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities that have stated that students with special needs require an intensity and systematic education not found in the inclusion environment. Advocates of children with visual and learning impairments have also been ignored, many of whom strongly encourage special schools on the grounds that an inclusive environment cannot be trusted to provide specialized services to children with special needs, and that it deprives many students of necessary cultural and social experiences (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994).

Inclusion may also deter self-concept by keeping students from coming in contact with others who have like disabilities, behavior disorders, mild/moderately mentally retarded and non-mildly mentally retarded students. One must ask how full inclusionists believe general education can respond appropriately to all students' special needs? How can inclusion improve so

dramatically as to bridge the gap between special needs and non-special needs students when the general classroom has not yet been able to accommodate the ethnic and economic diversity it has among its non- special needs students?

Leiberman (1992) and fellow researchers have compared the similarities between the policies of full inclusion with the deinstitutionalization of persons with mental illness. According to a study conducted by the Public Citizen Health Research Group and the National Alliance for the Mentally ill, deinstitutionalization has caused over a quarter of a million people with manic-depressive illness or schizophrenia to live on the streets, in shelters, or to be incarcerated. Its failure became so obvious that Seymour Kaplan, who pioneered the concept in New York State, often remarked that it was the worst mistake he had ever made. Destroying the self-concept of special needs students, that have lower self-concept in the first place, could be the grave mistake the school system makes in our lifetime. Thus, we must study to ascertain if self-concept is increased in homogeneous or heterogeneous groupings in special needs students.

Research Question One : Is there a difference between placement in homogeneous classes and heterogeneous classes an increased self-concept?

Research Question Two : Is there a difference or relationship between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups in pre-test and post-test scores?

Research Question Three: Is there a relationship between teacher attitudes and a student's self-concept?

Population

This study was conducted at a middle school in east Tennessee. Subjects that were studied are students that have been labeled as special needs students. One group of special needs students was in a single classroom homogeneous environment. The other group of special needs students that was studied were mainstreamed into a heterogeneous environment.

Procedures

The homogeneous class studied was a special education class in an extended resource room. The students studied in the heterogeneous classes were from the case loads of two special education teachers in inclusion.

The study consisted of the two sample groups. One group of five students was from a homogeneous class of special needs students in the seventh and eighth grade. The other five subjects were chosen at random from special needs students who were mainstreamed into seventh and eighth grade classes. The ratio of seventh and eighth grade boys and girls in the heterogeneous setting was matched as closely as possible to the makeup in the homogeneous class. The results are displayed in Table 1.

The control group of homogeneous special needs students and the experimental group of heterogeneous special needs students were given the Self-Appraisal Scale pre-test at the beginning of the semester which was compared with post-test results at the end of the semester. Results

indicate whether self-concept was raised, lowered, or remained constant in the homogeneous environment.

The homogeneous and heterogeneous groups were also subjected to a sociogram developed by the researcher to measure comfortability with students and teachers of their own grouping as compared with comfortability with non-special needs students and teachers of heterogeneous classes or homogeneous classes. Extra-curricular activities were also surveyed to view comfortability and its relationship to a positive self-concept.

Finally, observations were made of homogeneous and heterogeneous students. These observations detailed disruptive behaviors and acts of aggression. The observations and the results of the tests on the homogeneous class were then compared to the results of students in heterogeneous classes. Special needs subjects in the heterogeneous class and homogeneous classes completed the same steps.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of self-concept and homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping in seventh and eighth grade special needs students. Self-concept's relationship to parent support and teacher support was also studied. The literature has diverse opinions in the realm of self-concept. Therefore, this study examined a number of variables and their relationship to self-concept.

Research Questions and Related Hypotheses

Research Question 1: Is there a difference or relationship between placement in

homogeneous classes and heterogeneous classes and increased self-concept?

In response to research question 1, the mean scores for heterogeneous and homogeneous groups on self-concept were computed. The mean for the heterogeneous group was (M=58.00) and the mean for the homogeneous group was (M=55.40). There is a significant relationship between students in homogeneous classes and heterogeneous classes and increased self-concept.

To determine the difference, t-tests for independent means were conducted and the results indicated that there was no significant difference between the heterogeneous and homogeneous groups (t=.-62) Therefore the null hypothesis was retained. Results are displayed in Table 2.

Research Question 2: Is there a difference between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups in pre-test and post-test scores?

To answer the first aspect of research question 2 the researcher performed independent t-tests on the homogeneous and the heterogeneous groups' pre-test and post-test scores. The mean for the pre-test was (M=57.90). The mean for the post-test was (M=56.70). There is a difference between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups in pre- and post-tests.

The t-test for independent means was computed to test the mean scores of both groups. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores (t=.84). Therefore the null hypothesis was retained. The results are displayed in Table 3.

To respond to the second aspect of research question 2 the researcher performed the Pearson Product Moment Correlation between pre-test and post-test scores. The relationship between pre-test and post-test scores was (r=.85). This shows a strong relationship between pre-test and post-

test scores. Results are indicated in Table 4.

Research Question Three: Is there a relationship between teacher attitudes and homogeneous and heterogeneous special needs students' self-concept?

To answer research question 3 the Pearson Product Moment Correlation was conducted on teacher attitudes and special needs students' self- concept (r=.80). These results are indicated in Table 4. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation shows that there is a relationship between teacher attitudes and homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping and a student's self-concept.

Summary of Findings

This chapter contains a summary of the information that relates to a higher or lower self-concept in special needs students to certain variables. The recommendations to special needs students in middle school homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings for raising self-concept have specific implications for educators, parents and students.

Homogeneous and Heterogeneous Groups and Initial Self-Concept

A comparison of homogeneous and heterogeneous groups and self-concept indicated that there was no significant difference between the group. This suggest that the groups were similar as they began this study.

Parental Support and Self-Concept

Parental support showed no significant difference in relationship to self-concept. This

suggests that students had loyalties to their parents regardless of parental support. Sociograms administered to the students of both groups listed their parents (despite various abusive family situations) as the most important people in their lives.

Teacher Support and Self-Concept

There was a significant correlation between teacher support and the students' self-concept. Students with a team of consistently supportive teachers had higher self-concept scores.

Pre-test and Post-test Scores

When the performance of the students on the pre-test and post-test was compared the results indicated that there was a significant difference. This suggests that the environment, over a period of time, had an effect on a student's self-concept.

Conclusions

In conclusion, teachers and the classroom environment that they provide for special needs students have a direct impact on self-concept. Students' self-concepts, regardless of their grouping, are raised in consistently supportive school environments or lessened in inconsistent or unsupportive classroom environments.

Table 1

Demographic profile for students studied

gender	frequency	%
female	5	50
male	5	50

grouping	frequency	%
homogeneous seventh grade males	1	10
homogeneous seventh grade females	1	10
homogeneous eighth grade males	2	20
homogenous eighth grade females	1	10
heterogeneous seventh grade males	1	10
heterogeneous seventh grade females	2	20
heterogenous eighth grade males	2	20
heterogenous eighth grade females	0	0

Table 2

T-test for Self-Concept

Group	M	SD	t-value	2 Tail Significance
experimental	55.40	5.13	.62	.550
control	58.00	7.18	.62	.553

Note: P>05

Table 3

T-test for Pre- and Post-Test Scores

Group	M	SD	t-value
pre-test	57.90	8.02	.84
post-test	56.70	6.36	

Note: P>.05

Table 4

Correlation Matrix for Self-Concept

	Grouping	Parent	Teacher	Test 1	Test 2
Grouping	.40	.33	.80*	.18	.22
Parent	-.33	1.00	.55	.18	.40
Teacher	-.70	.55	1.00	.00	.06
Test 1	.18	.18	.00	1.00	.85*
Test 2	.22	.40	.06	.85*	1.00

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